

Abstract for ESA-3AF Space Propulsion 2014

Title: Small, Low Cost, Launch Capability Development
Author(s): Thomas Brown
Organization: National Aeronautics & Space Administration, Marshall Space Flight Center
Address: George C. Marshall Space Flight Center, Propulsion Systems
Department/ER01, Marshall Space Flight Center, Alabama 35812
Phone: (256) 544-0559
Fax: (256) 544-1630

A recent explosion in nano-sat, small-sat, and university class payloads has been driven by low cost electronics and sensors, wide component availability, as well as low cost, miniature computational capability and open source code. Increasing numbers of these very small spacecraft are being launched as secondary payloads, dramatically decreasing costs, and allowing greater access to operations and experimentation using actual space flight systems. While manifesting as a secondary payload provides inexpensive rides to orbit, these arrangements also have certain limitations. Small, secondary payloads are typically included with very limited payload accommodations, supported on a non interference basis (to the prime payload), and are delivered to orbital conditions driven by the primary launch customer. Integration of propulsion systems or other hazardous capabilities will further complicate secondary launch arrangements, and accommodation requirements.

The National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Marshall Space Flight Center has begun work on the development of small, low cost launch system concepts that could provide dedicated, affordable launch alternatives to small, high risk university type payloads and spacecraft. These efforts include development of small propulsion systems and highly optimized structural efficiency, utilizing modern advanced manufacturing techniques. This paper outlines the plans and accomplishments of these efforts and investigates opportunities for truly revolutionary reductions in launch and operations costs. Both evolution of existing sounding rocket systems to orbital delivery, and the development of clean sheet, optimized small launch systems are addressed.